



COMMITTEE ON
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STATEMENT

Rep. James Comer (R-KY)
Republican Leader, Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human
Services
Subcommittee Hearing on "Growing a Healthy Next Generation:
Examining Federal Child Nutrition Programs"
March 12, 2019

Thank you for yielding.

I'd like to thank my colleagues across the aisle for holding today's hearing. Before coming to Congress, I served as Kentucky's Agriculture Commissioner where I worked with school food service personnel from school districts across the commonwealth to promote initiatives including the Farm to School Program, encouraging fresh, "Kentucky Proud" foods to be served in local cafeterias. As I met with these local administrators, they consistently emphasized the crucial role that child nutrition programs play in supporting kids' healthy development, especially the free and reduced-priced meals offered through the federal school meal programs.

Free and reduced-price meals ensure that children from low-income households have reliable access to nutritious breakfasts and lunches while at school. Each school year, nearly 30 million lunches are served to students each day, with most participants receiving a free or reduced-price meal. Program participation has been steadily rising for decades, but in 2012, the Obama administration finalized an onslaught of federal mandates on school nutrition, delivering a blow to many cafeteria operations.

Schools had to overhaul their menu programming, including meeting new requirements that limit the kind of milk they can offer, mandate the color of vegetables they must serve, and limit the types of grains they must use.

Since the Obama administration enacted the regulations housed in the *Healthy and Hunger-Free Kids Act*, School Lunch Program operating costs have risen while national program participation has dropped. While we would hope that means there are fewer hungry children in this country, we have reason to believe that's not the case.

School districts, already tasked with operating on a tight budget, now face higher cafeteria operation costs, onerous compliance rules, and a mounting food waste problem as students pass up the food that cafeterias are now required to serve.

When kids are at school, they don't have a parent there encouraging them to eat the green peas on their plate. And while I know cafeteria professionals are doing all they can to get kids to eat their vegetables, the truth is some kids just aren't going to try them. However well-intentioned these requirements may be, they are limiting program effectiveness and causing students to forgo the meals they need. Kids deserve healthy and nutritious meals at school, but if the federal government mandates meals that students won't eat, then Washington is categorically failing to combat hunger.

For these reasons, Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue recently finalized new rules easing requirements on sodium, milk, and whole grains. School districts and students will benefit from these eased requirements, and Congress should take note.

While many folks found ways to help limit waste and increase participation, I hope this new, limited flexibility from USDA will boost meaningful participation in these programs and result in less taxpayer dollars being thrown straight into the cafeteria trashcan.

Congress should work with the states to provide school districts with greater latitude over their offerings. By delivering this flexibility and limiting burdensome paperwork, school districts will be able to customize their cafeteria menus to give the students they know and serve healthy options they will enjoy.

As a farmer myself I understand the importance of supporting local farmers by providing schools access to local, farm-fresh ingredients, and with three young children in public schools, I certainly understand the duty we have to educate our growing children about eating balanced meals.

I look forward to today's conversation and am hopeful we can find a solution that helps lower program costs, eliminates food waste, and ensures that students have access to nutritious, enjoyable meals.

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